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ABSTRACT

Two cases of youth violence in southwestern New Mexico, one involving an Anglo youth and one a Mexican American youth, highlight the diversity of the area and the biased treatment of Mexican American youth. New Mexico demographics suggest a link between diversity and high rates of crime and violence. National reports clearly report the extent of substance abuse, school dropouts, and delinquency among the nation's youth, especially minority youth. A contemporary response has been better use of public schools in promoting community-based solutions in rural areas, especially within minority communities where the cultural lifestyle differs from that of the dominant Anglo-American society. The realization of a crisis with at-risk youth in New Mexico, especially within ethnic communities, led to proactive initiatives to curb the problem. One such program prepares bilingual special education teachers to identify at-risk youth within their classrooms and to intervene to address problems. Ultimately, the focus on teacher preparation should impact student achievement, which in turn should eventually decrease or eliminate youth violence. A second proactive initiative provides services to under-educated Mexican American women in rural southwestern New Mexico. Designed to break the cycle of poverty and welfare in the region, this program is a culturally specific approach to violence reduction. Both programs utilize a coordinated team approach involving universities, public schools, the criminal justice system, community health facilities, community organizations, and families. (TD)

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Aggressive Behavior Among Rural Minority Youth: Concerns for Schools and the Community

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AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR AMONG RURAL MINORITY YOUTH: CONCERNS FOR SCHOOLS AND THE COMMUNITY

Introduction

Violence in schools has emerged as a critical issue in American society. School violence has impacted the rural southwest where recent youth-related homicides have shocked New Mexico. The rural southwestern part of New Mexico is a tri-cultural, bilingual region along the Mexico/United States border. Because the number of Mexican-Americans equals that of Anglo-Americans, both English and Spanish are spoken in the region. There are sharp socio-cultural distinctions between the Mexican-American communities on the United States side and Mexican communities located just across the border in Mexico. The cases described in this chapter exemplify the violence that sometimes erupts as a result of the cultural, language, and economic diversities of the area.

The three cultures come together in the New Mexico public schools that children living on both sides of the border attend. Hundreds of Mexican children, born in the United States and holding dual citizenship cross the border daily for school. Although similar situations may exist in other border states, border-crossing is more obvious in New Mexico, a state with the highest proportion of Mexican-Americans in the southwest region.

Two recent youth violence cases occurred in the southwestern part of New Mexico. This chapter presents the cases and describes the socio-educational factors contributing to a milieu of violence. Two training programs designed to reduce perceived aggravating circumstances exemplify constructive responses to violent incidents.

Two Cases of Youth Violence in Southwestern New Mexico

E.H.: Assault with a Deadly Weapon by an Anglo Youth

In May, 1998, E.H., a seventeen year old high school student, using two weapons, fired 18 bullets into his father's car following an argument. Class, ethnicity, and family status in the community promoted sympathy for the youth whose father was a local physician. E.H. pled guilty to a plea-bargained charge of second-degree murder. Petitions, circulated among the middle and upper Anglo-American community, requested that E.H. be treated as a juvenile, admitted to a mental health facility until his 21st birthday, and then released. The petition cited what the community considered to be compelling mitigating circumstances—alleged physical abuse and bipolar depression. The local press reported these factors and the petitioners' argument that they had caused E.H. to act impulsively without intent to injure. This cultural-ethnic bias (ethnocentrism) toward ameliorating E.H.'s sentence arose from the same community that insisted on a zero-tolerance policy toward gangs in the schools. Many in the Mexican-American community viewed the school policy as a process of racial profiling directed against Mexican and Mexican-American youth. The zero-tolerance rules most often targeted the dress, appearance, and behavior of Mexican American students.

The prosecutor countered the alleged mitigating circumstances with the aggravating circumstances surrounding the case. The prosecution noted that E.H. used two weapons to fire 18 bullets into the vehicle from his vantage point in the second story window of their home. Moreover, this was not the first incidence of violence involving E.H. Having an obsession with firearms, the youth had previously made plans for a mass killing, similar to the Columbine slaying, while he was a student at an exclusive New Mexican private school. His plans included taking over the school by first killing the campus police officers, and then systematically killing faculty and students, building by building. Finding written plans, a frightened peer alerted

campus officials. In the ensuing search, campus security found maps of the campus, a list of guns to be used, and a list of school authorities to be executed. The school expelled E.H. who he was an excellent student and served as president of the student body. Instead of being charged with either a delinquent or criminal offense, E.H. was admitted to an in-patient mental health facility. When it became apparent that no charges were pending, E.H.'s father enrolled him in the local high school where personnel claimed ignorance of the private school incident.

Facing a possible 20-year prison sentence, E.H. was sentenced to a 10-year term with time off for that served while awaiting trial. In response to the petitioners and to the defense, the judge noted that E.H., "...had sufficient sophistication and maturity to understand what he was doing and that he possessed a strong desire to kill—something he voiced to several people." (Owens, 2000). The judge also found that the mental illness defense was not warranted and that there was no convincing evidence that E.H. was seriously abused or neglected by his divorced father. Under New Mexico correctional system code, E.H. will be eligible for parole in 2004.

V.C.: Homicide of a Mexican-American Girl by a Mexican Student

In November, 1999, a twelve-year-old Mexican boy with dual Mexican-United States citizenship fired a .22 caliber pistol into a crowd of students at the local middle school, wounding a thirteen-year-old Mexican-American girl.

Mexican students cross the border daily to attend school in the United States, rather than in their impoverished border town where only a sixth-grade education is guaranteed. Prior to the 1994 North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA), any student regardless of citizenship could attend the United States border schools. A condition of NAFTA restricts this benefit to children holding dual citizenship—those children born in the United States. Most parents of dual citizenship children hold only Mexican citizenship and reside in Mexico but the difference in

quality of life and education between Mexico and the United States provides incentive for giving birth on the U.S. side of the border. V.C. is such a child, born to Spanish-speaking, Mexican parents in the United States and thus a citizen of both countries.

On the fateful November day, V.C. came to school with a pistol and fired into a crowded hallway, shooting A.T. in the back of her head. Despite availability of U.S. Border Patrol helicopters, an ambulance transported the Mexican-American victim, still alive, 55 miles to a hospital. The long journey contributed to A.T.'s eventual death. V.C.'s motives remain unclear. He apparently did not know his victim and may have fired randomly into the hallway. Why he had a pistol and how he carried it across the border are also unclear. V.C.'s father stated that his son had a history of emotional problems and had voiced suicide ideations.

The incident, a tragedy for the entire community, gained national attention. Yet there were no petitions circulated for V.C. by the affluent social classes. Few argued against charges of first-degree murder by the same prosecutor who presented second-degree murder charges against E.H. Middle school students continue to require intense counseling as a result of the shooting. The incident has intensified the strained relationships between the Mexican border community, the county in New Mexico, and the local school district. Marked differences in Mexican and United States cultural, social, and educational systems coupled with poor communication both within the middle school and among the three cultural communities involved have created an environment of misunderstanding and mistrust. Presence of the U.S. Border Patrol and the high incidence of both illegal immigration and illicit drug trafficking provide visual evidence of strain. These factors exacerbate negative stereotypes among Anglo-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Mexicans.

V.C. currently awaits sentencing for second-degree murder, a charge to which he was eventually allowed to plead. The judge postponed sentencing pending further clinical assessments of V.C.'s mental health.

These two cases highlight both the diversity of the area and the biased treatment Mexican-American youth might expect to receive, particularly in areas where the population is highly diverse. The question is whether a link can be made between diversity and high rates of crime and violence. The authors suggest that such a case can be made and consequently should be addressed.

Demographics of Youth Violence in New Mexico

Demographic health statistics demonstrate that New Mexico has high homicide and suicide rates. New Mexico's homicide rate is 91.5 per 100,000 persons for youth aged fifteen to nineteen, as compared with the national average of 69 per 100,000 persons. Grant County, where Western New Mexico University is located, has a homicide rate of 119.3 per 100,000, significantly above both state and national levels (Boyd, 1990; Hileman, 1997). New Mexico's suicide rate per 100,000 persons for youth aged fifteen to nineteen is 20.6, as compared to the national average of twelve. Grant County is above even the state statistics with a youth suicide rate of 26.5 (Boyd, 1990; Hileman, 1997). Factors such as poverty and health (both physical and mental) certainly play a role in these high rates.

The New Mexico Department of Health and Environment provided the following data profiling youth violence in the state (Lacerva, 1990):

- The homicide rate is one-third higher than the national average.
- The homicide rate for New Mexico's Native Americans is three times higher and for Mexican Americans is two and one-half times higher than for Anglo-Americans.

- Homicide is the tenth leading cause of death for the population overall, and the second leading cause of death for young males.
- Sixty-five percent of homicides involve use of alcohol.
- The state ranks first in assaults among the contiguous states of Arizona, Texas, Utah, Colorado, and Oklahoma.
- The suicide rate among young people is consistently twice the national average. Suicide is the seventh leading cause of death overall, and the second leading cause in 15 to 24 year olds.
- Nearly fifty percent of suicides involve use of alcohol.
- Motor-vehicle alcohol-related fatalities are the highest in the nation.
- One of five children is a potential victim of sexual assault before the age of 18.
- At least twenty percent of child abuse cases involve alcohol abuse.
- More than seventy-five percent of domestic violence assaults involve alcohol abuse.

New Mexico health statistics demonstrate that family poverty is a problem with over twenty percent of the state's population living below the poverty level. Twenty of the state's thirty-three counties exceed the national average for employable individuals being unemployed. Added to these data is the twelve percent statewide drop-out rate. A contemporary response has been better use of public schools in promoting community-based solutions in rural areas, especially within minority communities where the cultural lifestyle differs from that of the dominant Anglo-American society (Bermudez, 1994; Casganeda, 1994; Donato, 1997; Howley & Eckman, 1997; Mendoza, 1994; Schoellkopf, 1998; Sosa, 1993; Webb, Shurnway & Shute, 1996).

Awareness for the need for better mental health services within rural areas emerged in the 1990's (Bantam & Higbee, 1995; Boles, Casas, Furlong, Gonzalez & Morrison, 1994; Castaneda, 1994; Chavez, 1993; Chavez, Oetting & Swaim, 1994; Chavez, Deffenbacher & Wayman, 1996; French, Sanchez & Rodriquez, 1995; French & Picthall-French, 1998; Gibbs, Swaim & Teixeira, 1998; NG, 1996). The call went forth for a community-based response to counter the etiologies of personal, social, health, and educational problems plaguing minority youth, notably Mexican-Americans and Native Americans in the rural southwest. These problems when combined with cultural/lingual differences and economic inequity erupt into aggravated violence in communities at large and in schools as microcosms of the community.

Response to Youth Gangs and Aggression

The National Response

The United States Departments of Education, Justice, and Health and Human Services have issued reports addressing health and behavioral issues involving youth. Bilchik (1998) noted that, "Research has also demonstrated that juvenile delinquents tend to have both mental health disorders and substance abuse problems, and a high percentage of them also have conduct disorders. Finally, research and experience demonstrate that the services available in the juvenile justice system to alleviate these problems are entirely inadequate" (p. 1). Solutions to this nationwide problem will require better screening of mental health and substance abuse problems among juveniles within the justice system followed by effective treatment programs.

The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, in its Technical Assistance Publication Series monographs provided Series 17 to address treatment of substance abuse in rural areas. Bantam and Higbee's (1995) selection in the series suggested the need for collaborative strategies for reaching at-risk youth in frontier settings. Their community-based program served

western South Dakota, a rural region with sparse population, little industry, diversity (Native- and Anglo-Americans) and considerable poverty (but host to the Sturgis Harley-Davidson Rally!). The Black Hills Special Services Cooperative is a public sector cooperative of school districts, courts, law enforcement, and social service agencies. Such a model would fit any impoverished rural area with diverse cultures.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse in their research monograph Series 130 Drug Abuse Among Minority Youth: Methodological Issues and Recent Research Advances addressed the relationship between ethnic minorities, education and substance abuse. In this series, Chavez (1993) wrote that Hispanic (Mexican American, Cuban, and Puerto Rican) drop-outs had high rates of drug use. Seitz and Santos (1996) and Gertz, Bedard, and Persons (1995) found similar results in their research. Rodriquez (1996) noted that a major difference between Hispanics and the dominant society relevant to delinquency control is the role of the family. In Hispanic cultures, the family appears to have stronger influence than do peers. This contrasts with the dominant Anglo-American culture where peer power prevails.

National reports clearly report the extent of substance abuse, school drop-outs, and delinquency among the nation's youth, especially minority youth. How best to address the issues is far less clear.

New Mexico Community-School Assessment and Intervention

Assessment to establish base-line data is needed in order to understand the underlying issues in problems afflicting communities and their schools. Westover Consultants (1991) for the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) made a major contribution to the field of assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of youth problems with the Adolescent Assessment/Referral System (AARS). A major strength of this instrument is its clinical

methodology. The AARS provides three stages of referral for adolescents aged twelve to nineteen:

- Problem-Oriented Screening Instrument for Teenagers (POSIT) and the accompanying Client Personal History Questionnaire
- Comprehensive Assessment Battery
- Directory of Adolescent Services

The POSIT is a 139 forced-choice instrument provided in either English or Spanish. The POSIT provides scores on ten functional areas:

- Substance use/abuse
- Physical health
- Mental health
- Family relations
- Peer relations
- Educational status
- Vocational status
- Social skills
- Leisure and recreation
- Aggressive behavior/delinquency

A profile sheet displays these ten areas allowing for comparison of critical items. The instrument is ideal for measuring substance-induced disorders, mental and physical health issues, as well as educational, peer, familial, and/or community factors (Radhert, 1991).

French and Picthall-French (1998) administered the POSIT to a multicultural population of New Mexican, Mexican, and Afro-American youth in order to ascertain a "youth problem"

baseline. The POSIT given in border and reservation schools provided a means for analyzing bilingual/bicultural difficulties. An Afro-American sample from rural Mississippi served as a sub-sample involving youth identified as at-risk by the juvenile justice system. The analysis of 468 rural Anglo- Afro-, and Mexican-Americans, Mexican and Navajo youth indicated the following:

- Navajo females scored highest on the aggregate minimum mean score for pathology.
- They were followed by Navajo males, Anglo-American males, Afro-American males, Afro-American females, Mexican females, Mexican-American males, Mexican males, Anglo-American females, and Mexican-American females in that order.
- The southwestern adolescent sample exceeded the minimum mean score for pathology on peer relationships, substance use/abuse, mental health, educational status, and social skills.
- Peer relations, substance use/abuse, mental health appear to be functionally interrelated items for all groups.
- Anglo-American youth were the only sample that did not indicate pathology associated with educational status.
- Mexican-American males demonstrated significantly higher pathology than did Mexican males with regard to peer relationships, substance use/abuse, aggressive behavior/delinquency, and mental health.

The realization of a crisis with at-risk youth, especially within ethnic communities in New Mexico, led to statewide initiatives designed to curb the problem. In an effort to address both the quality of instruction in the public schools and to improve the student retention rate, the New Mexico State Department of Education established a complete competency-based system for teacher licensure. In 1993, the State Board of Education recognized the need to diagnose and

treat students with serious emotional or behavioral disturbances. These efforts continue given that Mexican-American youth dominate special education and remedial classes and fail at nearly twice the rate of their classmates (Smallwood, 2000).

Attempts are also being made to include education within juvenile diversion programs. Legislative action in 1990 led to the Community Corrections Early Intervention Program. Community corrections citizen panels work in conjunction with local community mental health facilities to devise intervention protocols and present these to the sentencing judge prior to case adjudication. Adult basic education classes are included as a component of the mental health package where drop-outs are enticed to complete their GED, and encouraged to attend parenting classes.

Bilingual/ESL Special Education Teacher Training (BESTT) Project. These efforts at community-school cooperation were strengthened in 1995 when Western New Mexico University, in conjunction with the border public school districts, obtained a federally-funded U.S. Department of Education multicultural, bilingual, special education personnel preparation grant. The grant project focused on preparing bilingual (English-Spanish and English-Navajo) special education teachers to identify at-risk youth within their classrooms and to intervene for addressing problems.

The critical need for bilingual special education personnel and programs drove the grant. There are very few public school professionals with the unique preparation necessary. Few, if any, school districts have an integrated or coordinated bilingual-special education program. For this reason, it is difficult for most public school districts to provide for identification and instruction of culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional children. As school districts have increasing numbers of highly tenured personnel, continuing professional development must

occur. Without continuing education, personnel will be unable to provide quality education programs or to adequately meet the unique educational needs of their students.

The grant project was designed to provide graduate level preparation leading to a Master of Arts degree in bilingual special education to school district personnel. Thirty special educators, primarily from minority backgrounds, enrolled in the program. The project goal was provision of well prepared educators for families and communities in southwestern region schools (Rodriquez & French, 1995). Ultimately, the focus on teacher preparation should impact student achievement. Educational achievement should impact the at-risk factors cited earlier in this chapter (e.g., cultural-linguistic differences, economic inequity, substance use/abuse, mental/physical health, etc) and eventually decrease or eliminate youth violence.

Adult Education Services (AES) Program. An outgrowth of the grant project was a second proactive initiative provided through Western New Mexico University's AES program. AES provides services to under-educated and under-trained minority (Mexican-American) women in rural southwestern New Mexico. The purpose of the outgrowth program was to break the cycle of poverty and welfare within this rural region.

The program provides needs assessments, counseling support, and follow-up support systems to identify and resolve/refer problems such as substance abuse, mental health issues, cultural barriers, domestic violence, family/relational problems, academic deficiencies, learning disabilities, and language skills deficiencies. The program focuses on job readiness including obstacles to learning, coping strategies, and problem solving skills.

Based on the traditional Hispanic extended family model, this program is a culturally specific approach to violence reduction. Educating adults, as well as children, will strengthen impact on at-risk factors to break the cycles of poverty and violence.

Summary and Recommendations

Both the BESTT grant project and AES outgrowth program continually assess needs and outcomes. The coordinated team approach involves participation by the University, public schools, criminal justice system, community mental and physical health facilities, community organizations and families. Biases and prejudices need to be resolved if interethnic stereotypes and animosities are to be reduced. The programs described are a beginning toward that end in New Mexico. Their components and strategies apply equally for rural or urban multi-ethnic, at-risk environments.

Culturally-specific legitimate group activities for teens should be reintroduced into at-risk communities. Better cooperation and coordination for proactive strategies are essential. Communities and schools too often react with intense, immediate responses to serious, visible problems. Proactive programs with the potential to build a sense of community among different groups tend to be low priorities for motivating communities, law enforcement, or schools toward intervention.

Qualified special education teachers and mental health practitioners are needed for underserved rural areas. Over half of the special education positions within the public schools are staffed with personnel on special exception status. These are teachers who have not met the New Mexico Department of Education standards for licensure. Clearly, preparation programs such as those initiated by Western New Mexico University need to continue if the cultural bases for poverty and violence are to be addressed and are to abate.

How many more communities and schools will suffer tragedy such as that described at the beginning of this chapter? Only with intense proactive intervention can we hope to break the cycle of violence and ethnically based inequities in response to that violence.

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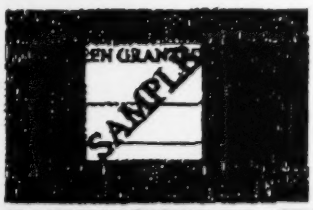	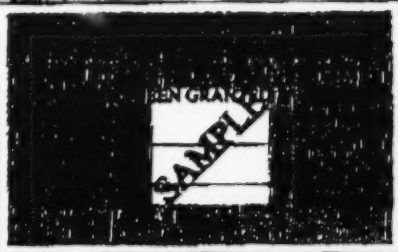	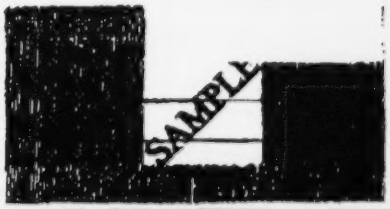
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